

Fluency 3-2-1 - Effective-Yes! But Do They Like It Too?

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ABSTRACT

This classroom research project addresses the subjective aspect of 3-2-1 fluency activities. 93 first year university students in a compulsory English Discussion class respond to a questionnaire that targets the students' attitudes with respect to enjoyment and perceived usefulness of this activity. The results of the survey suggest that the majority of students find this particular activity useful and for the most part enjoyable.

INTRODUCTION

This discussion course offers learners an opportunity to improve English communication skills by discussing topics in a group setting, however the underlying goal of this course is to improve fluency. The main role of EDC is to enable students to develop their speaking fluency and communicative ability within the context of English discussion (Spring 2012, Instructor's Handbook, p.1). It is difficult to define fluency precisely and many definitions exist, however I think it's fair to say that most of us have a general sense of fluency as "the ability to express oneself readily and effortlessly" as described in the online dictionary freedictionary.com. Skehan (in Ellis, p113) describes fluency as "the capacity of the learner to mobilize his/her system to communicate meaning in real time." This is a nice definition as it highlights not only the transfer of meaningful information, but includes the aspect of time pressure. According to Nation (1990) an effective fluency activity must include the following four elements;

1. it must be meaning focused
2. it must have time pressure
3. it must allow for a large volume (amount) of speaking
4. the topic on which the learner speaks must be very familiar such that time is not spent recalling details

The 3-2-1 fluency activity (originally 4-3-2) meets all these requirements and has become a mainstay in the EDC classroom. Studies have shown this particular activity to improve both speed and accuracy (i.e. fluency) of the learners (Nation, 1990; de Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

However in practice, learner motivation and willingness to communicate will always factor into the success of an activity in the language classroom. Jane Willis (1996) cites three essential conditions for language learning with motivation being one of the essential conditions. Without motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, it is unlikely that learning can take place.

As such, this survey was set to better understand the learners' frames of mind while performing this activity. As this course is compulsory, levels of motivation and interest vary. I was particularly interested to know how the very shy or quiet students felt about standing in front of peers and being forced to speak in English non-stop.

The questionnaire (see Appendices) was distributed to every student present for the final day of classes. A total of 93 students participated in the survey representing all levels, SABC. The classes were denoted as either highly motivated, average motivation, or quiet*. In addition, the survey results of five particularly shy students (labelled very quiet) were tagged.

The following questions were posed with a 4 point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The majority of students also added written comments about the activity.

1. I enjoy fluency activities.
2. I feel nervous when doing fluency activities.
3. I can say my ideas more fluently during the 2nd round.
4. Fluency activities help me prepare for the lesson topic.
5. After fluency, I can speak English more easily.
6. I would like to do this activity in every class.
7. I like 'Fluency' better now than the first time I tried it.

* This a subjective labelling from the teacher's perspective using the typical volume of focused output throughout the lessons each week as an indicator of motivation / willingness to speak for each class.

METHOD

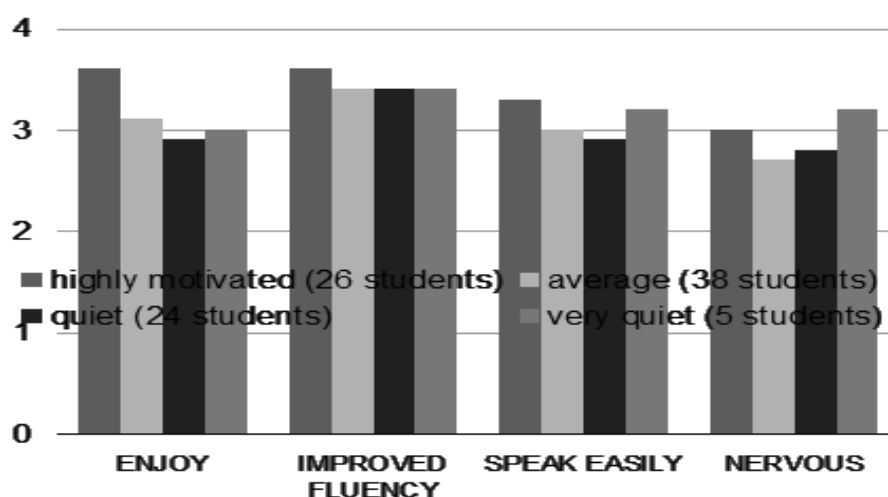
This activity is a shorter version of Nation's 4-3-2, for most classes this was a 2-1 activity with all students standing in two lines and changing partners with each round. Listeners were asked to be encouraging and supportive, but to not ask questions. The topics chosen were either review of the previous week or a general overview of the lesson at hand. In any case, the topics were meant to be very general with a lot of room for interpretation and subjectivity such that the students use information they are very familiar with.

Most students would have done a 2-1 stand-up fluency activity six times through the semester with the final lesson being a full 3-2-1. Eighty percent of students recalled doing similar fluency activities in their first semester.

RESULTS

The majority of students responded favourably to this activity. Even though most students reported that they felt nervous during this activity, they also indicated that they found the exercise both enjoyable and useful. (See full data in Appendices)

The following graph summarizes the average responses of each class-type subset to the target queries of this report.



Total Number of students surveyed: 93 (all levels represented; SABC)

Y axis: 1~4 Scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 4= Strongly Agree

X axis: ENJOY = Q#1. I enjoy fluency activities

IMPROVED FLUENCY= Q#3. I can say my ideas more fluently during the 2nd round.

SPEAK EASILY = Q#5. After fluency, I can speak English more easily.

NERVOUS = Q#2. I feel nervous when doing fluency activities.

Table 1

Most students also added written comments to the survey. Many of these confirmed the above results stating that they were a bit nervous doing it, but at the same time enjoyed it and found it useful. I was particularly interested in the opinions of the extremely quiet students. Two of these students were A level, three were B level. All five of these students seemed uncomfortable with the social aspect of Discussion class. However, all of the them responded positively to this particular activity. Here are some of their comments.

"I think fluency is fun because I can speak easy English." (extremely shy student)

"I enjoyed fluency than class topic." (very shy student, rarely spoke in discussions)

"Fluency activities always helped me prepare for saying my opinion. After I experienced fluency many times, now I can speak English more smoothly and say my opinion clearer than before. Thanks to fluency activities, I have confidence in speaking English." (very contemplative A-level student, long pauses before speaking)

Here are a few more examples of common remarks;

"I gradually got accustomed to speak English, and now, I like speak English!! As a result, it's very effective for me."

"Fluency make me think and speak at the same time. It is a good activity for me."

"Fluency helped me to speak English without hesitating."

"When I could do well in fluency, I had a feeling of achievement. This feeling encouraged me so much."

Not everyone felt nervous doing this activity;

"I don't have to worry about grammar or making mistakes so I am relaxed."

"I like fluency activities. That is because I don't need to use many function phrases. Moreover I can say anything that I like."

Even students who didn't really like fluency, found value in it;

"I'm not good at fluency so I don't like it. But I think fluency is very important. Because after fluency I can talk more easier."

"I'm not good at it, so actually I feel a little nervous and if I don't need it, I don't want to do it. But it makes my Japanese-brain to English-brain. So I think it is important that doing that at beginning of class."

Other benefits of this activity were also mentioned;

"I think it is good for warming up, and easy to be familiar with discussion members."

"I realized that my English become better and I know class friends more."

CONCLUSION

Given that motivation is an essential condition for language learning (Willis, 1996), this survey was intended to find out what students really thought of this high pressure fluency activity. If the students were unable to see progress or reason, or if they dreaded the procedure, it would be difficult to justify this activity regardless of theory or controlled experiments substantiating its effectiveness.

It is not always easy to estimate what students will think of an activity, whether or not they will appreciate it, and whether or not in the eyes of the learner the activity meets the intended objectives. Happily though, the students in this program overwhelmingly found this activity effective and worthwhile.

REFERENCES

- De Jong, N. & Perfetti, C.A. (2011). Fluency training in the ESL classroom: An experimental study of fluency development and proceduralization. *Language Learning*, 61, 533-568.
- Nation, P. (1989). Improving speaking fluency. *System*, 17 (3), 377-384.
- Skehan, P. (1996) in Ellis, R. (2003). *Task Based Language Learning and Teaching*, Oxford University Press, p 113.
- Willis, J. (2007). *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited. pp 14-15.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

Fluency as a warm-up activity. Fluency (2-1)

1. Did you do 'Fluency' type activities in the first semester Discussion Class?

一学期の Discussion Class で(Fluency) のような activity をやりましたか?

Yes / No / Can't remember

はい・いいえ・覚えてない

2. Please agree or disagree with the following statements about fluency activities.

下記の(Fluency) に関してのステートメントに「同意する」/「同意しない」を選んでください。

1= strongly disagree, 4= strongly

1= 強く同意しない 4=強く同意する

I enjoy fluency activities. 私は Fluency が楽しいと思う。	1	2	3	4
I feel nervous when doing fluency activities. 私は Fluency をする時に緊張する。	1	2	3	4
I can say my ideas more fluently during the 2nd round. 私は Fluency の一回目より、二回目の方が流暢に意見を述べる ことができる。	1	2	3	4
Fluency activities help me prepare for the lesson topic. 私は Fluency がトピックを話す前に自分のウォームアップとして役立っ ていると思う。	1	2	3	4
After fluency, I can speak English more easily. 私は Fluency の後に英語を話しやすくなると感じる。	1	2	3	4
I would like to do this activity in every class. 私は毎回 Fluency をしたいと思う。	1	2	3	4
I like 'Fluency' better now, than the first time I tried it. 私は Fluency が最初の時より、今の方が好き。	1	2	3	4
Please write any comments about Fluency activities. Fluency に関しての意見を自由に書いてください。				

APPENDIX B**Data Summary**

Questions	1. I enjoy fluency activities.				2. I feel nervous when doing fluency activities.				3. I can say my ideas more fluently during the 2nd round.				4. Fluency activities help me prepare for the lesson topic.				5. After fluency, I can speak English more easily.				6. I would like to do this activity in every class.				7. I like fluency better now than the first time I tried it.			
1= strongly disagree 4= strongly agree	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Highly Motivated (26 Ss)	0	1	13	12	1	7	10	8	0	3	5	18	0	1	10	15	1	3	8	14	1	3	14	8	1	1	12	12
Average (38 Ss)	1	7	18	12	4	13	11	10	2	1	14	21	1	4	18	15	2	5	16	15	2	10	16	10	2	4	20	12
Quiet (24 Ss)	0	3	20	1	2	5	12	5	0	1	12	11	0	4	15	5	0	5	16	3	1	10	10	3	0	4	14	6
Very Quiet (5 Ss)	0	0	5	0	0	1	2	2	0	0	3	2	0	1	2	2	0	1	2	2	0	1	2	2	0	0	3	2
Total	1	11	56	25	7	26	35	25	2	5	34	52	1	10	45	37	3	14	42	34	4	24	42	23	3	9	49	32